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Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice

Django Paris¹

Seventeen years ago Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) published the landmark article “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” giving a coherent theoretical statement for resource pedagogies that had been building throughout the 1970s and 1980s. I, like countless teachers and university-based researchers, have been inspired by what it means to make teaching and learning relevant and responsive to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students across categories of difference and (in)equality. Recently, however, I have begun to question if the terms “relevant” and “responsive” are really descriptive of much of the teaching and research founded upon them and, more importantly, if they go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society. In this essay, I offer the term and stance of *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as an alternative that, I believe, embodies some of the best research and practice in the resource pedagogy tradition and as a term that supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future. Culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. In the face of current policies and practices that have the explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society, research and practice need equally explicit resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and cultural equality.

Keywords: bilingual/bicultural; cultural analysis; diversity; equity; instructional practices; multiculturalism; social justice

It was now 17 years ago that Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) published the landmark article *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*. In that article, Ladson-Billings (1994) was working from her own seminal research with successful teachers of African American students. She was also giving a coherent theoretical statement for research and teaching that had been building throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the work of social language and literacy scholars like Labov (1972), Cazden and Leggett (1976), Smitherman (1977), Heath (1983), Moll (1992),

and many, many others. This work through the 1970s and into the 1990s, it would turn out, had grown to a critical mass by 1995 and the mid-1990s was a windfall moment in educational research at the intersection of language, literacy, and culture with African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander American students (Ball, 1995; García, 1993; Lee, 1995; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Moll & Gonzales, 1994; Valdés, 1996). This windfall moment in the mid-1990s amassed evidence for *resource pedagogies* in working with students of color marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language.¹ Ball and I (Paris & Ball, 2009) have called this moment the *golden age* of resource pedagogy research. This research sought to provide pedagogical and curricular interventions and innovations that would move teaching and learning ever further from the *deficit approaches* that echoed across the decades.

Deficit approaches to teaching and learning, firmly in place prior to and during the 1960s and 1970s, viewed the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome in learning the demanded and legitimized dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling (see Lee, 2007, Paris & Ball, 2009, Smitherman, 1977, and Valdés, 1996, for further discussion of the deficit to resource paradigm trajectory in research and practice). The dominant language, literacy, and cultural practices demanded by school fell in line with White, middle-class norms and positioned languages and literacies that fell outside those norms as less-than and unworthy of a place in U.S. schools and society. Simply put, the goal of deficit approaches was to eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and to replace them with what were viewed as superior practices. Examples of deficit approaches abound throughout the 20th century. From federal “Indian schools” with their goal of forcibly stripping Native languages and cultures from Indigenous American students and communities (reviewed and critiqued in Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006), to the “culture of poverty” research of the 1960s and 1970s (Jensen, 1969, is an infamous example of such research) with the view that the home cultures and communities of poor students of color were bankrupt of any language and cultural practices of value in schools and society (see Labov, 1972, for an early critique of culture of poverty

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research based in his studies with African American Language speakers).

Later, during the 1970s and 1980s, *difference approaches* marked a progression to viewing the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of students and communities of color as equal to, but different from, the ways demanded and legitimated in school teaching and learning. Still, the goal here was to bridge toward the dominant with little attention to maintaining the heritage and community practices of students and families.

Resource pedagogies, which were built from the previously cited seminal pedagogical and curricular work resisting deficit thinking throughout the 1970s and 1980s, repositioned the linguistic, cultural, and literate practices of poor communities—particularly poor communities of color—as resources to honor, explore, and extend in accessing Dominant American English (DAE) language and literacy skills and other White, middle-class dominant cultural norms of acting and being that are demanded in schools.

Resource pedagogies found their most lasting theoretical framework in the work of Moll and Gonzalez (1994) with their formulation of *funds of knowledge*. Building on their work with classroom teachers as ethnographic researchers in the homes and communities of Mexican American and Mexicana/o students in Tucson, Arizona, Moll and Gonzalez “use the term ‘funds of knowledge’ to refer to historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (133). They provide evidence, as have many researchers and practitioners after them, that teachers and students can successfully use such knowledge and skills in formal classroom learning. Another lasting theoretical framework supporting resource pedagogies has been the *third space* concept forwarded by Gutiérrez and her collaborators (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999). In her recent critical work revisiting and extending the third space concept, Gutiérrez (2008) draws on her research in Los Angeles with students from migrant farmworker families to describe a “curriculum and its pedagogy [that] are grounded in the historical and current particulars of students’ everyday lives, while at the same time oriented toward an imagined possible future” (154). In this way, she argues that such teaching and learning is not simply about building bridges for students between the often disparate knowledges of home, community, and school spaces but that teachers and students must bring together and extend the various activities and practices of these domains in a forward-looking third space. These two frameworks and the now decades of pedagogical work built through them, then, have looked to join the home and community practices, histories, and activities of students and communities of color with dominant school ones in meaningful ways that do not devalue either in the process of school learning and access.

It is important to recognize that access to the opportunities afforded by proficiency in the dominant academic and social ways with oral and written language and other cultural practices were goals of deficit and difference approaches too, though deficit approaches expected the eradication of heritage and community forms of communication and knowledge and difference approaches expected to focus attention solely on the legitimated school ways. The result of both deficit and difference approaches was the explicit (with deficit) and implicit (with difference) expected outcome that

students would lose their heritage and community cultural and linguistic practices if they were to succeed in American schooling. Let me note here that my use of “heritage and community” practices is based in contemporary understandings of culture as dynamic, shifting, and ever changing. Although the heritage practices of many communities of color (e.g., Indigenous American Languages and cultural ways of knowing, African American Language and cultural ways of knowing) have historically been and continue to be the target of deficit approaches, contemporary linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural research has pushed against the tendency of researchers and practitioners to assume unidirectional correspondence between race, ethnicity, language, and cultural ways of being (Alim & Reyes, 2011; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Irizarry, 2007; Paris, 2011). Such assumptions about direct and universal correlations have led to the unfortunate simplification of resource pedagogies as solely about considering heritage and traditional practices in teaching and not also about considering the shifting and changing practices of students and their communities. I will return to this point shortly.

This very brief description of some major conceptual moves in educational research and, to a lesser extent, practice with students of color marginalized by systemic inequalities brings me back to Ladson-Billings’s (1995) landmark article and her formulation of *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP). CRP and, less so, *culturally responsive pedagogy* (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Gay, 2000), have become ubiquitous in educational research circles and in teacher education programs.² This speaks, I think, to the lasting conceptual value of the terms and approaches and, as well, to the decades of cultural and educational justice research that preceded and followed them. I, like countless teachers and university-based researchers, have been inspired by what it means to make teaching and learning relevant and responsive to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students across categories of difference and (in)equality.

Recently, however, I have begun to question if these terms are really descriptive of much of the teaching and research founded on them and, more importantly, if they go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of students and communities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our increasingly multiethnic and multilingual society. In her 1995 formulation, Ladson-Billings called for “a culturally relevant pedagogy that would propose to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order” (474). By “cultural competence,” Ladson-Billings was speaking of supporting students in maintaining their community and heritage ways with language and other cultural practices in the process of gaining access to dominant ones. In her third tenet, Ladson-Billings also called for the development of an explicitly critical and praxis-oriented stance in students. We must ask ourselves if the research and practice being produced under the umbrella of cultural relevance and responsiveness is, indeed, ensuring maintenance of the languages and cultures of African American, Latina/o, Indigenous American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and other longstanding and newcomer communities in our classrooms. Furthermore, we must ask if a critical stance toward and critical action against unequal power

relations is resulting from such research and practice. Finally, we must ask ourselves if the very terms “relevant” and “responsive” are descriptive of what we are after in teaching and learning in a pluralistic society.

In his recent conceptual and pedagogical work around centering teaching and learning in Hip Hop cultures, Alim (2007) makes an “ideological distinction between a curriculum that is based in the cultural-linguistic reality of students, and one that is *culturally appropriate, culturally responsive, culturally relevant*, or whatever other term we have produced to describe classroom practices that use the language and culture of the students to teach them part of the ‘acceptable’ curricular cannon” (27). With Alim, then, I question the usefulness of “responsive” and “relevant”—like the term “tolerance” in multicultural education and training, neither term goes far enough. Relevance and responsiveness do not guarantee in stance or meaning that one goal of an educational program is to maintain heritage ways and to value cultural and linguistic sharing across difference, to sustain and support bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism. They do not explicitly enough support the *linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality* (Paris, 2009, 2011) necessary for success and access in our demographically changing U.S. and global schools and communities.³

Although it is clear that Ladson-Billings (1995) was laying out the ground for maintenance and cultural critique, the term and stance of “relevance” or “responsiveness” does little to explicitly support this goal. It is quite possible to be relevant to something or responsive to it without ensuring its continuing presence in a student’s *repertoires of practice* (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), and so its presence in our classrooms and communities. We need a new term and a new approach that will not only more accurately embody some of the best past and present research and practice but will also offer pre-service and in-service teachers a way of both naming and conceptualizing the need to meaningfully value and maintain the practices of their students in the process of extending their students’ repertoires of practice to include dominant language, literacies, and other cultural practices.

I offer the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as an alternative that I believe embodies some of the best past and present research and practice in the resource pedagogy tradition and as a term that supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future. The term *culturally sustaining* requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. A pluralistic society, we must remember, needs both within-group cultural practices (in the case of language, say, Spanish or African American Language or Navajo or Samoan) and common, across-group cultural practices (in the case of language in most institutional settings in the United States, Dominant American English) to exist and thrive (Paris, 2011). A pluralistic society needs both

the many and one to remain vibrant. Such educational and cultural values of pluralism in linguistic and cultural practices have been supported by the United States in word—though rarely in deed when immigrant communities and communities of color are involved—since its founding (Heath, 1992).

Let me return to my earlier point about the dynamic, shifting, and ever-changing nature of cultural practices. In thinking about sustaining and extending the cultural practices and ways of knowing of students marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language, it is important that we do not essentialize and are not overdeterministic in our linkages of language and other cultural practices to certain racial and ethnic groups in approaching what it is we are seeking to sustain. A recent line of inquiry has sought to both solidify and disrupt traditional assumptions about linguistic and cultural ownership and practice, looking at how young people importantly both rehearse traditional versions of ethnic and linguistic difference and offer new visions of ethnic and linguistic difference (Alim & Reyes, 2011; Irizarry, 2007; Kirkland, 2011; Paris, 2009, 2011). This work has looked at, for instance, the important ways African American students navigate identities through African American Language (AAL) and Hip Hop cultures, and also how other young people of color, like Latina/o and Pacific Islander youth in the U.S. and youth across racial and national boundaries globally, participate heavily in AAL, Hip Hop cultures, and other cultural practices originating in and associated with African American and Caribbean American culture (Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2009; Paris, 2011). Irizarry’s (2007, 2011) work has explicitly looked to extend conversations about culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy by investigating how successful teachers of Latina/o students enact *cultural connectedness* through understanding and embracing the cultural fluidity Latina/o youth engage in, which includes traditional heritage language and cultural practices as well as AAL and Hip Hop. Finally, my own work (2011) has also looked at the ways African American and Pacific Islander youth in changing urban communities share in the Spanish language with their Latina/o peers. So although it is crucial that we look to sustain African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, and Indigenous American languages and cultures in our pedagogies, we must be open to sustaining them in both the traditional and evolving ways they are lived and used by contemporary young people.

As we consider the need for culturally sustaining pedagogies, we must once again ask ourselves that age-old question: What is the purpose of schooling in a pluralistic society? It is brutally clear that current policies are not interested in sustaining the languages and cultures of longstanding and newcomer communities of color in the United States. English-only policies; narrow, decontextualized language and literacy programs in poor communities of color; and even one state’s explicit ban on studying the histories, literatures, and struggles of particular ethnic groups (see Arizona House Bill 2281)⁴ are examples of the return of ever-more explicit deficit perspectives, policies, and pedagogies (Nieto, 2011; Paris, in press). This climate, and the policies and teaching practices resulting from it, has the quite explicit goal of creating a monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being. Such a climate has created the need for equally explicit resistances that embrace

cultural pluralism and cultural equality. Without such resistances students will continue the age-old American saga of being asked to lose their heritage and community ways with language, literacy, and culture in order to achieve in U.S. schools. And this saga of linguistic and cultural loss has had and continues to have devastating effects for the access and achievement of students and communities of color in U.S. public schools. There is much recent research that embodies the culturally sustaining pedagogies we need (Alim, 2007; Cammarota, 2007; Chang & Lee, 2012; Hill, 2009; Irizarry, 2011; Kinloch, 2010; McCarty, 2002; McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006; Morrell, 2004; Souto-Manning, 2010; Winn, 2011; are just a few important examples). This research and the pedagogical, curricular, and teacher learning innovations it forwards is interested not in relevance or responsiveness, but in sustaining and extending the richness of our pluralist society. Such richness includes all of the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being that our students and communities embody—both those marginalized and dominant.

How are the terms and concepts of our work with teachers, policymakers, and the public forwarding a more equitable education and society? The long struggle against dehumanizing deficit approaches to education and toward humanizing resource approaches has never been easy. The research I have cited here has been an integral part of this struggle toward an education that honors and extends the languages and literacies and practices of our students and communities in the project of social and cultural justice. I offer the term, the stance, and the practice of culturally sustaining pedagogy as a needed step in this struggle.

NOTES

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¹In previous work I have used the term “culturally and linguistically marginalized students of color.” Although “marginalized” implies a marginalizing and is more specific, accurate, and egalitarian than “minority students,” “underserved students,” “underprivileged students,” or “at-risk students,” the term “marginalized” still places the burden of difference and inequality on the culture and language of students (and people) of color. That is, students’ language and culture is framed as marginal. Conversely, “students of color marginalized by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language” (and, when appropriate to the focus of the work, other categories of difference, like gender, class, ability, or sexuality) places the burden of difference and inequality not on students, communities and their practices, but on long-standing and continuing systems of social inequality tied to race, culture, and language.

²Other important terms and formulations that have looked to forge resource pedagogies with students of color include, but are not limited to, *culturally congruent pedagogy* (Au & Kawakami, 1994), *culturally compatible pedagogy* (Jacob & Jordan, 1987), *engaged pedagogy* (hooks, 1994), *everyday pedagogies* (Nasir, 2008), and *critical care praxis* (Rolón-Dow, 2005). I focus this article on the term and formulation of *culturally relevant pedagogies* and, less so, on *culturally responsive pedagogies* as these have become, in my view, the most used, short-handed terms and concepts in teacher education, teacher practice, and research on teaching and learning.

³In previous work (Paris, 2009, 2011) I have defined *linguistic dexterity* as the ability to use a range of language practices in a multiethnic

society and *linguistic plurality* as consciousness about why and how to use such dexterity in social and cultural interactions.

⁴In January 2012, Arizona House Bill 2281, popularly known as the “Ethnic Studies Ban,” was invoked by the State Board of Education and the local School Board to close the academically successful Mexican American Studies program in Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). This closing included the removal of, among other texts, Latina/o and Indigenous American literature and history from classrooms and the explicit instruction to teachers in the program not to use remaining canonical texts in ways that focused on themes of race and oppression. I should note that having met and presented with teachers and students in the program and having viewed and read interviews and presentations by teachers and students in the program that TUSD’s Mexican American Studies program represents, in my opinion, the enactment of robust culturally sustaining pedagogies.

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